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ABSTRACT

Arguing that the use of peer groups in a writing classroom theoretically supports the goals of the paradigm shift from emphasis on written product to writing process that has occurred in recent years, this paper examines the complexities confronting teachers who attempt to use groups for instructional purposes. Following a brief introduction, the first section of the paper traces the emergence of the use of peer groups in the writing classroom, touching upon the shift from product to process to collaboration and upon research in the area of collaborative and group learning. The second section of the paper discusses how language learning theory supports group work. In particular, this section examines the social context of schools and theories of language learning and the various features of collaboration. The third section looks at research on peer response, and the final section discusses future research directions. A five-page list of references concludes the paper. (FL)

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CENTER FOR THE STUDY OF WRITING

Technical Report No. 4

Historical Overview: Groups in the Writing Classroom

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May, 1987

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HISTORICAL OVERVIEW: GROUPS IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

by

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INTRODUCTION

The past twenty years have been for writing teachers a time of intense fermentation, reflection, and innovation. The reasons are many, resting partly in social and demographic change, and partly in a professional paradigm shift generated by research into how writers write (Hairston, 1982). The shift has diverted the main instructional focus away from written products and toward writing processes. We will argue first that using peer groups in the writing classroom theoretically supports and goes beyond the goals of this paradigm shift. Then we will suggest the complexities confronting teachers who attempt to use groups to help them achieve their goals.

Groups can support the paradigm shift in several ways. First, as teachers have begun to shift attention to the writing process, they have taken seriously rhetorical theory and findings from research which show the importance of writers' concepts of their audience (e.g., Corbett, 1971; Flower & Hayes, 1979). Peer groups provide a convenient structure for helping students in a class develop a sense of audience. Furthermore, research suggests the importance of students writing to broader audiences than the "teacher-examiner" (Britton, et al., 1975); peer groups expand the actual audience to which students write. Second, recent research on the writing process argues the importance of allowing students time to go through an elaborated writing process in which they have opportunities to think about their topics as well as to revise their work. Peer groups can play a number of roles in that expanded process. More specifically, in expanding the process, teachers need to provide for response to students' ideas and their writing all along the way, not just at the time they hand in their final version (Freedman, 1985a, 1985b, in press). Peer groups can assist teachers, who are generally overworked, in providing response.

Perhaps deeper and more significant than the shift toward the writing process are new understandings of the teaching and learning of writing. Briefly, Vygotsky (1978, 1986) emphasizes the importance of social interaction to language learning. In classrooms, small groups can be used to increase students' social interactions among students and thereby their potential to help one another acquire written language.

Currently, numerous articles and books by teachers warmly advocate the use of peer groups (e.g., Moffett, 1968; Murray, 1968; Elbow, 1973, 1981; Hawkins, 1976; Moffett & Wagner, 1978; Bruffee, 1978; Macrorie, 1979; Healy, 1980). (See Gere [1987] for a complete catalogue of the work on peer response groups in the writing classroom.) In spite of such works and in spite of the theoretical interest in groups, the actual use of groups is more complex than it at first appears to be. What little we know about how

well students actually work together in groups gives conflicting findings about the success of groups (e.g., see Berkenkotter, 1984, and Newkirk, 1984, for negative findings about groups as compared with Nystrand, 1986, Gere & Abbott, 1985, and Gere & Stevens, 1985 for discussions of the positive effects of groups). These conflicts find further support in a national survey of 560 successful teachers of writing (Freedman, 1985a). Freedman documents disagreements between teachers and their students over the effectiveness of groups; students agree that groups are relatively useless while their teachers disagree among themselves about the usefulness of groups, with some liking them and others not finding them useful. We know little about precisely why groups work when they do, or, perhaps more importantly, what accounts for their failures.

Because of the theoretical import of groups and because of the problems that they pose, we will: (a) trace the emergence of the use of peer groups in the writing classroom, (b) elaborate a theoretical framework to contain and inform both the use of groups in the classroom and future studies of those groups, and (c) raise questions for future research about writing groups.

THE EMERGENCE OF GROUPS IN THE WRITING CLASSROOM

Myers (1986) and Gere (1987) remind current practitioners that the small-group approach to writing instruction is not so new as most suppose. Gere (1987) in her extensive history of the use of and research on writing groups shows that "writing groups have existed as long as writers have shared their work with peers and received commentary on it" (p. 9). She traces the history of groups in the United States back to the early days of the colonies when they were part of literary societies. She documents their use in classrooms as early as the last part of the nineteenth century.

Both Myers and Gere point to Sterling Andrus Leonard's Dewey-inspired textbook, *English Composition as a Social Problem* (1917), for an enthusiastic discussion of many of the same group techniques generally thought of as "new" today: elementary-age students are to meet in groups to respond to each other's papers; they are encouraged by their teacher to invent any necessary terminology and, above all, avoid harsh, nitpicky criticism. Leonard writes, "We must encourage prompt condemnation of guerilla petti-fogging whenever we discover signs of it" (p. 164). Embracing Dewey's vision of the school as miniature community, Leonard seeks to create harmonious, cooperative relations among students as they pursue together shared educational goals, mirroring in the process the image of an ideally functioning society. As Myers points out, Leonard's philosophy is echoed in recent works by advocates of the small-group approach, including Elbow (*Writing with Power*, 1981) and Bruffee (*A Short Course in Writing*, 1985), both of whom encourage positive, supportive interactions among writing group members. Both Bruffee and Leonard emphasize the salutary effects of requiring small groups to push toward collective "consensus."

Shifting Trends in Teaching Writing: Product to Process to Collaboration in the Classroom

While the philosophic underpinnings motivating the use of groups in the early part of this century and today are similar, much has changed since Leonard taught writing at the turn of the century that affect how we view groups in the writing classroom. English instructors may still be scrambling, as they were in Leonard's day, to establish

their own professional status (Myers, p. 158), but the challenge presented by our rapidly expanding knowledge of how writing is best taught and learned changes the tone of the struggle. From Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1963), Hairston (1982) borrows the term "paradigm shift" to describe the change generated by the profession's new knowledge of writing and writers. According to Kuhn, disciplines are governed by conceptual models which, when threatened by emerging anomalies, are gradually forced to give way to reformed or even wholly different paradigms. Such is the case, argues Hairston, with writing instruction, as the traditional product-centered model is questioned in light of the emergence of recent work by linguists, cognitive psychologists, anthropologists, and composition theorists. Hairston goes on to list key features of the new paradigm: it focuses on writing as a process, with instruction aimed at intervening in that process; it teaches strategies for invention and discovery; it emphasizes rhetorical principles of audience, purpose, and occasion, with evaluation based on how well a given piece meets its audience's needs; it treats the activities of pre-writing, writing and revision as intertwining, recursive processes; and it is holistic, involving nonrational, intuitive faculties as well as reason (p.86).

A moment's consideration of Hairston's list begins to suggest some reasons for the popularity of the collaborative approach: groups present an arena for intervening in the individual's writing process, for working collectively to discover ideas, for underscoring the writer's sense of audience, for interacting with supportive others at various points in the composing process, and even, perhaps, for developing the writer's intuition. Emig, who has written a similar description of the new paradigm (1979), underscores the important role social exchange can play in the writing process. Seen formerly as "a silent and solitary activity," with "no community or collaboration," writing is now acknowledged as a process "enhanced by working in, and with, a group of other writers, perhaps especially a teacher, who gives vital response including advice" (pp. 140-141). At this point, Emig makes a special case for peer groups that have the particular function of responding to group members' writing.

Bruffee (1984, p. 6), an enthusiastic proponent of peer response groups, cites both Kuhn and Rorty in arguing that knowledge is not a static given but "socially justified," evolving as communities of "knowledgeable peers" interact, thus shaping, extending, and reinforcing one another's ideas. It is this sort of self-governed dynamic which we must allow our students, Bruffee (1978) argues, if they are to dis-cover "the social and emotional foundation upon which intellectual work rests" (p. 462).

As an example of learning based in a community of "knowledgeable peers," Bruffee cites M.L.J. Abercrombie's *The Anatomy of Judgement* (1960), a study which documents how peer influence works through a process of group discussion to develop the diagnostic judgement of medical students at the University of London. Bruffee has argued (1973) that while such peer collaboration is indeed the norm in the professions and in business, it has traditionally been absent from the classroom--a gap which becomes even more noteworthy considering the potent influence of peer dynamics throughout one's school years. Bruffee cites Newcomb and Wilson's (1966) research as evidence that, indeed, peer-group influence is "the single most powerful force in undergraduate education" (p. 449). Corsaro (1985) and Dyson (1987) have made a case for the increasingly important role of peer friendship as an influence on learning as early as nursery school, and Labov (1982) has studied the importance of peer networks in shaping the language and value systems of inner-city adolescents.

Research on Collaboration and Groups

There is some evidence that teachers may feel threatened by the sheer force of peer influence and its potential to undermine the organizational norms of school (Sieber, 1979). For example, Graner (1987) argues for the benefits of writing workshops over peer groups because the workshop "does not require that teachers surrender any classroom control" (p. 43). Still a number of anthropological researchers argue that peer dynamics can be channeled in productive ways that support teaching and learning processes. For example, Cooper, Marquis, and Ayers-Lopez (1982), Newman, Griffin and Cole (1984), Steinberg and Cazden (1979), and Wilkinson (1982) have recently demonstrated the effectiveness of students as teachers and collaborators. These researchers suggest that groups can supplement teacher-led learning by training students to assist each other on tasks that are too difficult for an individual student to accomplish alone. Similarly, Michaels and Foster (1985), in a study of a first grade class's "sharing time," have shown how peer teaching can enhance language learning even among very young children as they play to an audience of "sympathetic but discriminating" classmates (p. 157). Lopate (1978) has suggested that among older students, collaborative class writings help to bridge the gap between oral discussion and independent writing. Social skills theorist Argyle has argued (1976) that because peers share similar cognitive constructs, they can communicate more readily with one another than they can with a teacher--that while they may not know as much as their instructor, peers hold special potential to build one another's confidence, social skills, and motivation. Sociolinguist Eckert (1986) has suggested that the power of peer influence can be channeled advantageously among "burn-out's," those high school students who actively resist the traditional norms of school.

But even with this evidence for the efficacy of peer collaboration, questions remain about the various functions such activities can serve and how best to frame them. In a national survey of 560 successful teachers of writing and 715 of their students, Freedman (1985a) finds that while teachers express faith in their own ability to respond to their students' writing, they disagree substantially about the helpfulness of peer response. Other studies foreshadow this finding. For instance, peer tutoring in dyads and collaborative group work are often mentioned together as possible alternatives to more traditional instruction, but opinions vary as to how much one-on-one and small-group collaborations differ in form and purpose. Sometimes training students in individual peer tutoring is seen as basically the same thing as training them to work together in groups. Bruffee (1978), for instance, refers to the essential similarity between one-on-one peer tutoring "and its classroom counterpart, the organized, progressive, collaborative peer criticism" (p. 451). Brannon and Knoblauch (1984) move toward a sharper distinction, suggesting that while students receiving response from groups of classmates benefit from widely ranging feedback on their writing, individual tutoring encourages more searching self-analysis of the writer's ideas and strategies (p. 45). Spear (1984) takes the argument one step further, arguing that subjection to multiple points of view in group sessions promotes cognitive growth by encouraging Piagetian "cognitive dissonance" in the writer, thus enabling one to "anticipate other points of view and to reflect with detachment upon the value of one's ideas" (p. 74). In a review of research into peer collaborations around a variety of (non-writing) tasks, Damon (1984) has noted that one-on-one tutoring seems most suitable to those situations "where there is a need for supplementary bolstering of adult instruction," while collaborative groups are better suited to acquiring "basic reasoning skills" (Damon, p. 338, cites Sharan, 1984 and Slavin, 1980 on these points). Such general comparisons lead to the conclusion that there are major differences between one-on-one and small-group collaboration in writing instruction.

HOW LANGUAGE LEARNING THEORY SUPPORTS GROUP WORK

We will now discuss a theoretical framework that can inform studies of learning in small groups. Vygotsky's theories, which emphasize that learning is a result of social interaction, provide such a framework. Although his theories were developed through studies of dyadic interaction, it is possible to extend them to examine small groups (e.g., Damon, 1984; Freedman, 1985b, in press; Forman & Cazden, 1985).

Vygotsky (1978) says that all "good learning is that which is in advance of development" (p.89) and involves the acquisition of skills just beyond the student's independent grasp. Such learning, Vygotsky argues, is accomplished through collaborative activity in what he calls the student's "zone of proximal development." He defines the zone as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p. 86). In this zone, continues Vygotsky, lie those functions "not yet matured" but "in the process of maturation," functions that can be termed the "buds" or "flowers" rather than the "'fruits' of development" (p. 86). Once an aspect of development comes to fruition, the child (or, indeed, adult) is able to proceed independently. Thus, the "actual developmental zone," which can be gauged through traditional assessment procedures, gives us information about development but not potential, since "the actual developmental level characterizes mental development retrospectively, while the zone of proximal development characterizes mental development prospectively" (p. 87). Thus two students may display a similar degree of com- pleted mental development, but their "developmental dynamics" may be quite different, allowing one to go much further than the other when both are given equal help (p. 87).

Bruner (1978) has coined the term "scaffolding" to describe the instructional strategies of the expert or "more capable peer" interacting with learners in their respective zones of proximal development. According to Applebee and Langer (1983), an effective scaffold has five key elements. First is "intentionality," meaning that the support must address what the student wants to do but cannot manage alone; if both teacher and student are clear on what the task's purpose is, then the student can be evaluated from the standpoint of what he or she tries to achieve, even if unsuccessfully. Second is "appropriateness," meaning that the task must be in the child's zone of proximal development, just beyond his or her present grasp and therefore involving emerging abilities. Third is "structure," that is, the teacher's modelling and questioning must center on an appropriate paradigm of how to complete the task. Fourth is "collaboration," in that the instructor re-models, re-casts, or expands on a student's efforts, but steers clear of judgmental correction or evaluation. Finally, a scaffold involves "internalization," with the student gradually acquiring the ability to perform the task alone, in new circumstances, without external scaffolding. Cazden (1979, p. 11) adds a useful caution: while the metaphor is helpful to a point, Vygotsky's theory calls for a special sort of assistance for the learner, which, rather than being completely discarded, is "replaced by a new structure for a more elaborate construction" as the developing student moves forward through the zone of proximal development, building upon completed learning ("development") to pursue more complex, sophisticated tasks. The concept of scaffolding is more mechanistic than the kind of help Vygotsky suggests learners get through social interaction.

The Social Context of Schools and Theories of Language Learning: Tensions and Possibilities

Although Vygotsky's theories of language learning seem useful to understanding the teaching and learning of writing, there are as yet many gaps in our understanding of how his theories can be applied to actual teaching-learning situations. What, for instance, are the chances of this type of interaction taking hold among peers, particularly groups of peers, interacting around specimens of their writing? Greenfield (1984) has pointed out the particular difficulty of constructing and calibrating social interactions suitable to assist learners with complex tasks such as language learning. While the cognitive challenge implied in groups working on writing has not been formally assessed, one might surmise that it constitutes a considerable social and cognitive burden.

Research indicates certain built-in impediments to the collaborative process in classrooms. For example, Freedman and Greenleaf (1985) discuss the essentially hierarchical structure of most classrooms where the premium is placed on competition and individual achievement. However, theorists offer some clues to what peer collaboration might look like under optimal conditions although the picture remains rather sketchy--especially where school-based literacy tasks are concerned. Some of the existing examinations of the Vygotskian model in action do involve linguistic tasks, revealing how mothers construct language-learning supports for young children (e.g., Ninio & Bruner, 1977; Rogoff & Gardner, 1984). While such studies are useful illustrations, they offer no information about the cognitive capacities needed to interact supportively, nor do they address problems encountered by students (at any level) attempting to replicate early language learning in the home. Indeed, a number of researchers indicate that social interactions that support learning--whether between teacher and student or among peers--are far less likely to occur in school-based learning. Cazden (1979), for instance, suggests a dramatic shift will occur in children's interactional patterns as they leave the home environment and enter the classroom and that the mismatch between home and school creates interactional difficulties for children from non-mainstream communities when they enter school. Heath (1984) follows working-class and middle-class children from their home environment into the classroom and describes the nature and consequences of differing interactional demands. She finds that the black working-class children whom she studied come to school with well-established narrative patterns that are unlike those that dominate the classroom. Their learning is made difficult since the interactional environment in the classroom does not build from or understand the patterns these children learn at home. She concludes that teachers need to be sensitive to the needs of different learners and to adjust classroom interactions to better account for what different learners do and do not know.

In their study of "reciprocal teaching," Palinscar and Brown (1984) suggest using students as teachers to restructure teacher-dominant interactional patterns in school. Seventh-grade students who are experiencing difficulty with reading comprehension are trained to coach one another. Given a wealth of structured, explicit instructions and extensive modelling of the prescribed strategies by an expert, the students are able to succeed in the peer-teaching experiment, with "sizeable gains on criterion tests of comprehension, reliable maintenance over time, generalization to classroom comprehension tests, transfer to novel tasks that tapped the trained skills of summarizing, questioning, and clarifying, and improvement in standardized comprehension scores" (p. 117).

While such collaboration may seem novel within the classroom, even the casual observer is aware that children outside school engage regularly in group problem-solving,

notably without instruction or monitoring from a teacher. Newman, Griffin, and Cole (1984) note that cognitive tasks carried out individually in the classroom are often divided and approached cooperatively in after-school clubs (p. 137), a reflection of the fact that the collaborative mode--first mastered in the child's earliest, home-based learning experiences--remains the norm outside of school. Newman et al. argue that young children experience a kind of culture shock as they move from the cooperative environment of the home into the classroom, where the premium is on individual problem solving and where cooperation among peers is called cheating (p. 137).

Features of Collaboration

What are the essential features of collaborative interaction within the classroom framework? Forman and Cazden (1985) have noted that one problem with channeling this capacity for collaborative work toward the goals of schools is that too little is known about how peers interact. So strong is our Western, industrial-society bias toward individual achievement, they argue, that neither psychologists nor educators have looked at how students "work together to produce something that neither could have produced alone" (p. 329). In order to compare the types of strategies that emerge when students work together or individually on a problem, Forman conducts a study in which four pairs of nine-year-olds work together on chemical reaction problems involving combinatory logic while a control group works individually. On an initial post-test, dyads demonstrate striking gains over the singletons. Perhaps even more interesting are the insights into students' problem-solving patterns yielded by the study. Styles of collaboration, for instance, are of varying depths, ranging from "parallel," where students share materials and comments but fail to otherwise monitor one another's work; to "associative," where some information is exchanged about various combinations selected without any further coordination of the students' roles; to "cooperative," where students constantly monitor each other's tasks, carefully coordinating roles (p. 338). Particularly in this "cooperative" mode, students tend to argue about conflicting solutions enroute to a shared one, thus fulfilling the hypothesis of Piagetian theorist Perret-Clermont that cognitive conflict "serves as a mediator between peer interaction and cognitive reorganization" (p. 340).

But where Piaget looked for cognitive conflict to promote growth-inducing disequilibrium, Forman and Cazden argue that "he was not interested in describing or explaining social processes as a whole" (p. 340). They turn to Vygotsky for his insights into the interactional transformation of interpsychic into intrapsychic regulation that can occur among peers (p. 342). Vygotsky's theories lead them to conclude that this transformation is achieved when peers assume "separate but complementary roles," one student observing, guiding, and correcting, while the other performs the task. Thus, the students are able to accomplish together what neither can do alone, much as if they have been tutored by a "more capable" peer. Peer dyads can allow for many of the same learning opportunities as tutoring offers, conclude Forman and Cazden, by providing an "impetus for self-reflection encouraged by a visible audience," the "need to respond to peer questions and challenges," and by requiring the student to "give verbal instructions to peers"--that is, take on the cognitive challenge of role-playing the expert. Although they acknowledge that "a Piagetian perspective on the role of social factors in development can be useful in understanding situations where overt indices of cognitive conflict are present," Forman and Cazden suggest that "if one wants to understand the cognitive consequences of other social interactional contexts, Vygotsky's ideas may be more helpful" (p. 343).

Damon (1984) argues that while the Piagetian and Vygotskian models of peer instructional interaction may at first appear oppositional, they can in fact be seen as mutually complementary. In the Piagetian view, he notes, peers provide a compelling source of cognitive conflict--especially since peers speak on a similar level, usually with a directness that seems comparatively non-threatening. Because peer feedback is taken seriously, peer disagreements readily produce both social and cognitive conflict. The conflict pressures peers to become aware of views other than their own, to reassess the validity of their own points of view, and to learn to justify their opinions and communicate them to others. In contrast with Vygotskian theory, this Piagetian framework emphasizes peer interaction as a trigger for change in that cognitive dissonance may set the process in motion, but growth is seen as the product of restructuring the child's internal reasoning processes. Damon notes that, on the other hand, a Vygotskian view of peer interaction stresses the gradual internalization of intellectual processes (such as verification, spontaneous generation, and criticism) which are activated as peers communicate with one another. Vygotskian theory thus promotes the view that "peer feedback not only initiates change" but also "shapes the nature of change itself" (Damon, 333).

Some researchers following a Vygotskian tradition argue that essential to the social nature of learning is the process of reaching consensus. However, there remains argument about whether peer consensus constitutes any index of co-operative group work. In a recent *College English* article offering advice to those who conduct evaluations of collaborative writing classrooms, Wiener (1986) supports the argument for consensus, suggesting that where groups fail to push toward ultimate agreement, collaboration gives way to a mere delegating of traditional tasks (p. 55). Citing Bruffee's (1985, p. 45) prescription that tasks lead to "an answer or solution that can represent as nearly as possible the collective judgement and labor of the group as a whole," Wiener stresses that a push toward ultimate consensus should be clearly implicit in all assigned tasks. While the teacher should keep a distance from the students' collaborative workings, as the class meets once again as a whole his or her job becomes one of helping students synthesize apparent contradictions among the conclusions reached by various groups (p. 58).

This emphasis on consensus is particularly troubling to Myers (1986), who emphasizes the fact that arguments for collaborative learning--whether spearheaded by Leonard in the last century or Elbow and Bruffee in this one--encourage conformity to the status quo by stifling ideological differences. "Bodies of knowledge cannot be resolved into a consensus," he writes, "without one side losing something" (p. 167). Since peer groups ostensibly function to instill a sense of the varied, sometimes idiosyncratic nature of response, the presence of disagreement can sometimes be a sign that the process is working. The "consensus" controversy is thus intricately tied to the issue of how student collaboration is intended to function.

Although most research on groups in writing classes focuses on response groups, small groups can and do serve widely varying functions--even when their announced purpose is the seemingly well-defined act of responding to paper drafts. Hillocks (1981, 1984, 1986) discusses some aspects of how groups function. He suggests that "natural process" and "environmental" classes often work in small groups, but toward different ends. Hillocks places in the natural process mode those classes where students are given little or no direct instruction in the qualities of good writing; students in such classes may meet often in response groups, but they are given broad instructions and asked ultimately to come up with their own criteria for commenting. Classes in the environmental mode, while also featuring high levels of peer interaction, structure

small-group discussions toward solving well-defined problems relevant to particular features of the writing process. According to Hillocks, a typical environmental activity might consist of a teacher first leading "a brief discussion of student writing, helping students apply a set of criteria to it," then asking students to "apply the same criteria to other pieces of writing, not only judging the piece but generating ideas in response to several questions about it in order to improve it" (1984, p. 144). While students learn identifiable writing skills in environmental mode classrooms, the lesson comes through interactive problem solving--not through listening to presentational-style lectures. A classroom in Hillocks's "presentational" mode, with its emphasis on teacher-led discussion and lecture, would be unlikely to include small groups at all. Hillocks's research indicates that of the three modes, the environmental is the most productive (p. 147)--a finding which raises certain concerns about the wide use of natural-process style response groups, where students are turned loose upon the rather far-reaching, often ill-defined task of commenting on one another's work.

Independent of the research and theory related to writing groups, a number of professional leaders advocate their use. Interestingly, these advocates show fundamental differences in their advice about how to organize groups. Moffett (1968) asks students to serve as responders and coaches, while Elbow (1973) and Macrorie (1979) fall more squarely into Hillocks's "natural-process" school, asking students to respond viscerally and perhaps idiosyncratically to others' writing (see Sperling, 1985). In the meantime, Healy (1980) offers advice to secondary teachers on how to train and monitor writing response groups, exhibiting a focus on careful, pragmatic planning.

Of the many ways response groups can be framed, each structure shapes differently how members of a group will interact and what kind of feedback will be offered. In explaining to groups just what they are to do, a teacher must make many decisions. For instance, will the papers be read silently or aloud? If the latter, will students be provided copies of the written drafts? How will students know what kind of feedback to provide? Will their attention be channeled toward certain features of the texts by specific, teacher-generated guidelines, or are they to look more generally for features that bother or impress them as individuals? In what order should they address the various components of evaluation, and which should be given greatest emphasis? Are they to look only at the ideas and issues presented, or attend at some point to more mechanical concerns such as syntax, style, spelling, and punctuation? Will their feedback be presented orally, in writing, or both? How much argument or direct criticism will be allowed? Should the response procedure be altered depending on the type of writing under consideration? What about passive group members--should everyone, as Perl and Wilson (1986) suggest, be required to give at least some feedback on each paper? What if no one can think of anything to say?

RESEARCH ON PEER RESPONSE

That these important aspects of the response-group process are shaped in widely differing ways presents a dilemma to teachers and researchers. In one of the few existing studies of response groups, Gere and Stevens (1985) compare writing group language across fifth-, eighth-, and eleventh-grade levels. Each of the groups studied follows the same format, modeled on Elbow's "teacherless" writing class; drafts are read aloud twice, with group members listening the first time, taking notes the second time (no one besides the writer has access to a written version of the essay), and then offering oral response. Gere and Stevens record group sessions on audiotape and later transcribe them. Each "idea unit" of talk (Chafe, 1980) is then coded to indicate whether

it "informs," "directs," or "elicits," and to indicate whether it reflects a focus on the group itself or the paper under discussion. Since the most commonly occurring idea unit "informs" group participants about the content of the writing being discussed, the study offers reassuring evidence to teachers that response groups receiving fairly minimal guidance are capable of staying on task. Beyond that, Gere and Stevens argue that student talk tends to be far more specific to a particular text than are teachers' written comments, which "may be said to attempt to form student writing by conforming it, that is, by trying to realize its potential similarity to a paradigm text by asking the writer to conform to certain abstract characteristics of 'good' writing" (p. 101). Students' comments, on the other hand, are found to be more attentive to the writer's intended meaning, "a meaning which is often compounded of a variety of questions, comments and criticisms of quite different 'interpreters' who may each find a different 'meaning'" (p. 103). Gere and Stevens claim that student response is thus not only more specific, but richer and more varied than teacher feedback alone.

Nystrand (1986) studies 172 students participating in college-level classrooms with and without writing response groups and with groups which use varied organizations. He offers preliminary conclusions which suggest that students who work in groups do not evidence greater gains in their writing than those who do not. However, he finds differences across the different types of groups. When group members both listen to a paper being read aloud and follow along on a copy of the written text, they are more likely to attend to higher-order considerations (such as structure and presentation of the paper's central argument), while merely listening results in more attention to lower-order problems (such as word choice). Nystrand also offers an interesting analysis of essential differences in how different types of groups deal with problems. Some, for instance, seem to consider their task complete once they summarily label a general problem, failing to examine the trouble source in any great detail. Other groups talk at length about ideas--a potentially useful strategy if the writer needs help finding a focus, but which more often leads students off the subject. Nystrand asserts that the best groups are "characterized by extensive collaborative problem solving," where the group joins together in addressing one rhetorical problem after another in a concrete and cooperative manner, thus creating an environment--not unlike that of initial language acquisition--in which the learner continuously tests hypotheses about the possibilities of a written text. Nystrand argues that such groups serve an important function in "heightening students' awareness of discourse strategies, i.e., of how they write and how they might write" (p. 1).

Other smaller-scale, naturalistic studies of college-level peer response groups contradict Nystrand's rather optimistic thesis. Newkirk (1986), for instance, questions how well peer feedback supports the goals set by a writing teacher. In his study, ten students at the University of New Hampshire are evaluated by ten teachers and peers on four different writing tasks. Striking differences emerge between teacher and student feedback, and, in contrast to Nystrand's findings, Newkirk finds student responses lacking in a number of ways. First, his analysis reveals that strong peer identification among the students makes them more willing than their teachers to fill in missing elaboration as they read, thus rendering them more tolerant of what the teachers consider thin or undeveloped prose. Second, the students tend to reward a rather clumsy attempt at extended metaphor in one paper on the assumption that it is the sort of thing their teachers would like. Finally, Newkirk points out key differences in reader stance--the teachers being more often willing to put aside personal opinion and help students express their own ideas, the student respondents tending more fully to indulge their own opinions and idiosyncrasies, sometimes simply rejecting an idea rather than helping a writer

better express it. Based on his findings, Newkirk concludes that in asking students to write for their peers, teachers may not be giving them the best preparation for school writing. He acknowledges a dilemma: on the one hand, if students are told to consider audience but then allowed to write only to the academic community, cynicism may be fostered; on the other hand, if peer feedback is "vetoed" in teacher evaluations, the value of student collaboration may be lost. Newkirk argues that the answer lies in careful demonstration of response strategies before peer sessions take place, and in helping students realize that they are in the role of apprentices, not experts. While teachers should listen carefully to student responses and not assume misreading, they should also be aware that student response can diverge from teacher intent in unpredictable and often unsatisfactory ways.

In another study of college-level response groups, Berkenkotter (1984) examines the sometimes confusing task student writers face in reconciling their own imperatives with the suggestions of others. In her case study of three students in a freshman composition course, Berkenkotter finds that each responds differently to reader feedback, depending on the individual writer's "personality, level of maturity, and ability to handle writing problems" (p. 313). One student abrasively resists others' suggestions; another maintains inner-directed control of her text despite confusing suggestions by her groups; a third is so responsive to the sometimes hyper-critical feedback of her group that she loses sight of her real purpose for writing, regaining it only as she begins to take a more adversarial stance toward her group. Stressing that we do not yet know much about the process by which students gain authority over their texts, Berkenkotter urges caution in classroom use of peer response groups, where the interplay of "subtle emotional and intellectual factors" can leave some students feeling more confused than enlightened (p. 318).

Beyond noting the helpfulness of providing group participants copies of each essay, Nystrand offers few clues as to why the groups he studied are successful. Newkirk and Berkenkotter, meanwhile, demonstrate that peer influence can as easily subvert as support educational goals, a conclusion supported by numerous anthropological studies of schooling (for an overview and discussion of these, see Sieber, 1979). The problem of how to effectively channel the power of peer influence thus emerges, and herein lies a central issue: While "collective forms of pupil behavior" have been seen as "intrusive elements in the school, obstructive to the accomplishment of its formal goals" (Sieber, p. 208), collaborative learning advocates urge teachers to relinquish a large chunk of their power to independently functioning peer groups. Some teachers attempt to qualify this surrender by prescribing tightly knit, carefully detailed guidelines to groups (for instance, asking response groups to answer a series of questions about each paper rather than simply discussing whatever seems most important to them).

The issue of teacher versus student control is complicated further by the traditional grading system. Freedman and Greenleaf (1985) find that for some students, learning and getting good grades are synonymous whereas this is not the case for others. As Gere and Abbott (1986) point out, asking students to provide independent response to each other's papers does not necessarily reduce the importance they attach to the grades they will eventually receive from a teacher.

NEEDED RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

A number of questions remain unanswered about the nature of collaborative learning in general and groups in writing classrooms in particular. More studies are needed of the actual functioning of groups within writing classrooms. In particular, such studies need to consider the larger instructional context as well as the internal dynamics of groups themselves. Important questions include:

How do groups function in the classroom?

How do groups fit into the rest of the instructional context?

What factors internal to peer groups influence how peer group learning can take place?

When groups are set up for response to writing, how do students give and receive response to one another?

When groups are set up for problem-solving, how do students interact with one another?

Answers to such questions could begin to show: (a) the influence on group function from the larger instructional context which is created by a teacher's philosophy of teaching writing; (b) actual patterns of students' communicative interactions during group sessions; (c) ways that social dynamics within peer groups influence the ways that students approach academic tasks in groups; (d) ways that students respond to one another's writing in groups; (e) ways that students solve intellectual problems. The strong theoretical rationale for the use of groups coupled with the difficulty teachers and students have in getting groups to function productively makes such work essential to better understanding the teaching and learning of writing.

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